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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 005371

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/12/2017
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [GG](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: MFA ON POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN GEORGIA

Classified By: A/DCM ALICE G. WELLS FOR REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: In a November 13 conversation, the Ambassador reinforced with DFM Denisov U.S. efforts in Tbilisi and urged GOR restraint. In a separate meeting, MFA Fourth CIS Department Director Kelin welcomed EUR DAS Bryza's statements encouraging the Georgian leadership to restore the political process in Georgia. Kelin doubted the GOG would conduct fully democratic presidential elections on January 5, but argued that the Georgian opposition was a politically relevant force, if still weakened from previous GOG arrests and harassment. Kelin flatly denied that there was a troop build-up in Abkhazia, stressing that any detected movements were part of the normal rotation of troops and equipment. Kelin and Georgian Charge Shugarov separately described the November 9 meeting between DFM Karasin and Georgian DFM Vashikadze as "very difficult." Karasin viewed as premature Vashikadze's proposal to establish a dialogue on normalizing bilateral ties, particularly any time before the December 2 Duma elections, but FM Lavrov may agree to meet Georgian FM Bezuashvili on the margins of the upcoming OSCE Ministerial. Karasin lectured Vashikadze on the need for Tbilisi to set a democratic example for South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Pro-Kremlin youth groups have organized demonstrations outside the Georgian embassy, but turnout remains low. End Summary.

Georgia's Domestic Politics

¶2. (C) On November 13, the Ambassador reiterated to DFM Denisov U.S. efforts in Tbilisi and underscored the need for Russian restraint. In a separate meeting with MFA Fourth CIS Department Director Andrey Kelin, we reviewed EUR DAS Matthew Bryza's calls for an immediate end to the state of emergency, the return of independent media (especially Imedi TV), and the need to take steps to address the fundamental political, economic, and social challenges in Georgia. Kelin was pleased that the U.S. and the EU were expressing its concerns about the Georgian government's behavior in a public manner (and not simply behind closed doors), although he had received reports that Imedi TV would not be reopened.

¶3. (C) Kelin welcomed Bryza's engagement with Georgian opposition figures and agreed that Georgia took the right step by calling for early presidential elections. However, Kelin cast serious doubt on the fairness and openness of the electoral process. He stressed that the January 5 election is sandwiched between major holidays in Georgia (Christmas and New Years on one side and Orthodox Christmas on the other side) and is only weeks away, making it difficult to organize election observers. Kelin underscored that the GOG still has not lifted the state of emergency, the ban on independent media remains in effect, and the opposition parties will not have enough time to mount an effective campaign.

¶4. (C) Kelin argued that the Georgian opposition had come back from political near-death to constitute a politically

relevant force. However, he downplayed prospects of unseating Saakashvili in the upcoming elections mainly because the GOG arrested or removed from politics the most charismatic leaders prior to the previous presidential elections. He called the current opposition leaders only "remnants of the opposition movement." He noted that the GOG moved especially hard against current leaders Tsotne Gamsakhurdia and Shalva Natelashvili, who are facing charges of espionage and conspiracy to overthrow the government, but denied press reports that they had sought refuge in Russia.

Karasin-Vashikadze Meeting

15. (C) Kelin stressed that the GOR was reluctant to go ahead with the already scheduled November 9 meeting between DFM Karasin and Vashikadze, given the expulsion of three Russian diplomats in Tbilisi. "As we expected," Kelin said, "the Georgians came here empty handed." He noted that Vashikadze proposed only that a "channel" of communication be established, but the substance or format of the communication remained unclear. Kelin noted that Vashikadze suggested that FM Lavrov and FM Bezuashvili meet on the margins of the upcoming OSCE Ministerial. Although Kelin thought Lavrov would not oppose the meeting, Karasin underscored for Vashikadze the need for positive signals from Tbilisi, such as the release of the two detained South Ossetian peacekeepers, before a formal channel can be established.

16. (C) Karasin also told Vashikadze that the expulsion of the Russian DCM in Tbilisi was especially offensive to the GOR, given that minister counselors "cannot be involved" in the work of security services. Characterizing the expulsions as a "deliberate demonstration of subversive action," Karasin

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said the latest GOG actions left a "very bad impression" on the GOR.

17. (C) Georgian Charge Givi Shugarov separately told us that the Karasin-Vashikadze meeting was "very difficult." Karasin told Vashikadze that the "unprecedented" expulsion of the Russian diplomats and the strong anti-Russian rhetoric from Saakashvili and other GOG officials made it very difficult for the GOR to agree to a dialogue on normalizing relations with the GOG. Karasin stressed that Russian society, particularly in the run up to the December 2 Duma elections, would not accept such "normalization." Shugarov said Karasin insisted that Russia does not have "aggressive intentions" in Abkhazia or South Ossetia. Karasin noted that Russia is not interested in annexing either of these territories and pressed the GOG to "lead by example" by adopting policies that would attract the Abkhaz and South Ossetians to Tbilisi, underscoring that pictures of police beating demonstrators in front of Parliament was counterproductive on many fronts.

Russian Troop and Arms Build-up in Abkhazia?

18. (C) When asked about recent GOG statements of increased Russian activity in Abkhazia, Kelin flatly denied the accusations. Kelin said that Defense Ministry officials had confirmed prior to our meeting that the only activity taking place in Omchamir, Abkhazia, was the "normal rotation" of troops and suggested that any movement of arms was directly related to the "normal process." (Note: Press reports indicate that Russian Deputy Chief of Staff of Land Forces Yevnevich called the Georgian allegations a "canard." End note.) We urged Russia to refrain from actions or statements that would only worsen the political situation in Georgia.

Demonstrations Outside of Georgian Embassy

19. (C) Shugarov confirmed that approximately 40 demonstrators from the pro-Kremlin youth group Young Russia

demonstrated peacefully outside the Georgian embassy on November 12, focusing their ire on Saakashvili, while praising the friendship of the Georgian and Russian nations. We observed around 15 protesters around the corner from the Georgian embassy on November 13, who were carefully watched by seven police officers. Shugarov said the demonstrators are generally members of pro-Kremlin groups Young Russia, Young Guard, or Nashi.

¶10. (C) Kelin assured us that Moscow Mayor Luzhkov's office provides ample protection around the Georgian embassy every time a Russian organization applies for permission to hold a rally outside the embassy. When asked about Luzhkov's strong public statements on the need for the GOR to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Kelin noted that Luzhkov's comments should be taken as those from "a private citizen" and do not represent the official Russian position.

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